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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000210

SIPDIS

KINSHASA PLEASE ALSO PASS BRAZZAVILLE  
NDJAMENA PLEASE ALSO PASS GBANGUI  
AF/C PLEASE ALSO PASS MALABO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [GB](#) [SP](#)  
SUBJECT: GABON: PRESIDENT BONGO SAID TO BE RECEIVING  
MEDICAL TREATMENT IN EUROPE

REF: LIBREVILLE 0195

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Gabonese President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, who is seriously ill, is said to be receiving medical treatment in Europe. His precise location is unknown, although he appears to have traveled first to Spain, and may be receiving treatment there. His prognosis is uncertain. Unease is growing in Gabon about his condition, and about arrangements for succession and governance in the event of the president's death or prolonged incapacitation. End Summary.

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Evacuation for Medical Treatment  
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¶2. (C) Bongo, the world's longest-serving president, is seriously ill, perhaps with cancer (reftel). It now appears that he was evacuated from Gabon sometime after his May 6 discharge from a Libreville hospital and taken to an undisclosed destination in Europe. He is believed to have been accompanied by a team of expatriate doctors.

¶3. (C) The Government of Gabon has made no public mention of the president's medical condition, the fact of his absence, or his current location. A government spokesman announced May 6 that Bongo was "suspending" his activities as president, and receiving no visitors, so that he might properly mourn his wife. First Lady Edith Lucy Bongo Ondimba died March 14 in Morocco after a protracted illness.

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Spain?  
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¶4. (C) Various news reports, mainly on the internet, claim Bongo is in Spain. Sources close to the Bongo family confirm that the president traveled at least initially to Spain, accompanied by his oldest daughter (and chief of staff) Pascaline Bongo, a former head of Gabon's elite Republican Guard and a handful of other close aides and family members.

¶5. (C) Sources at the Spanish Embassy in Libreville confirm that they issued several visas on an urgent basis to members of the President's entourage prior to his reported evacuation. They point out, however, that with "Schengen" visas valid throughout Europe, Bongo could have traveled elsewhere for treatment. And in any case Spanish diplomats

here claim that they cannot confirm Bongo's current whereabouts.

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President Also Said to be Depressed  
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¶6. (C) At least two persons with close knowledge of the Bongo family say that in addition to his physical problems, the president was "devastated" by First Lady Edith Bongo's death and subsequently entered a period of severe depression.

President Bongo is said to have declined food, refused to meet visitors, and indicated to close associates that he is "tired" and no longer interested in his work.

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Family Arrangements and  
Succession Politics  
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¶7. (C) There are credible reports in Libreville of recent meetings of the Bongo family to discuss arrangements in the event of the president's death or incapacitation. According to these reports, oldest daughter Pascaline Bongo has been given responsibility for handling family finances and other family business. Her brother Ali Bongo, the president's son and defense minister, is said to have been instructed to remain in Gabon and ensure stability during this period of uncertainty.

¶8. (C) Ali Bongo has also been groomed to take over in the event of the president's death, though he faces opposition

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from some powerful political figures both inside and outside his family. In any case, it is clear that there is some degree of continuing animosity and misunderstanding between Pascaline and Ali Bongo, and various political figures allied with them. Pascaline Bongo is said to have no desire to rule Gabon, although her long-term consort Paul Toungui, currently Minister of Foreign Affairs, may have presidential ambitions.

¶9. (C) Under Gabon's constitution, Francine Rose Rogombe, the president of the Senate, takes over in the event of the president's death or incapacity. Rogombe, believed to be an Ali Bongo ally, would then have up to 45 days to organize an election for a new president.

¶10. (C) Ali Bongo, either directly or through his putative ally Interior Minister Andre Mba Obame, controls all of Gabon's security forces. Ali Bongo has also positioned himself to capture the presidency of the ruling Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG) in the event that his father--the current president of the PDG--dies. He would then be the PDG candidate for president of Gabon. Although there could be a struggle within the PDG, there is little doubt that whoever wins the PDG nomination would, one way or another, carry the ensuing election. There are also reports that Ali Bongo and his allies have at least evaluated the possibility of changing the constitution to permit election of a new president by the Senate or National Assembly if the sitting president dies or is incapacitated. This would obviate the need for an unscheduled popular election.

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Other Troubles  
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¶11. (U) In addition to confusion about President Bongo's condition, the country is also troubled by the economic difficulties of ordinary citizens and a potential return of labor unrest in key sectors. Teachers, for instance, are threatening to return to a strike that they suspended--after the government promised concessions--earlier this year. Union leaders claim government has failed to honor its promises. Should the strike resume, many students will be

ineligible to take critical exams and will be forced to repeat the school year. This could also cause protests and unrest.

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Comment  
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¶12. (C) Uncertainty is growing in Gabon, and will not abate until there is more definitive news of President Bongo's whereabouts and condition. For the moment, arrangements within the powerful Bongo family are probably adequate to govern the country and squelch any potential unrest. The system of governance that Omar Bongo created, however, is dependant on a single, powerful president who has historically intervened to resolve problems great and small. Whatever the state of President Bongo's health, it appears increasingly unlikely that this system will endure much longer. End Comment.  
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